

LEGACY OF BIPOLARITY FOR PRESCHOOLERS

People affected by bipolar disorder experience abnormal mood swings, which can fluctuate from periods of extreme overexcitement (mania) to periods of extreme sadness (depression), sometimes interspersed with periods of stability.

Toronto researchers involved in the Pittsburgh Bipolar Offspring Study (BIOS) wanted to examine the development of psychiatric problems in children aged two to five whose parents have bipolar disorder. Does their parents' bipolarity have an impact on their development? Are they at greater risk of developing the disorder?

To find out, the researchers assessed 121 children of bipolar parents, using various diagnostic tests for a number of psychiatric disorders, such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional disorder, and anxiety. They were particularly interested in exploring mood disorders, such as mania and depression, in order to detect potential precursory signs of bipolar disorder in the children. These results were then compared with those of 102 children who came from comparable backgrounds but whose parents did not have bipolar disorder.

The results of these studies showed that children with bipolar parents, particularly those over four years old, were twice as likely to develop two or more psychiatric disorders. They were also eight times more likely to develop ADHD.

Children of bipolar parents displayed more symptoms of mania and depression than the other children; however, these symptoms were not yet strong enough to establish a mood disorder diagnosis (except for three of the 121 children assessed).

Dr. Benjamin Goldstein, a psychiatrist, one of the authors of the current study, and a scientist at the Sunnybrook Research Institute in Toronto, explains. "A factor that adds to the challenge of accurate diagnoses in pre-pubertal children is that these children have more limited means of expressing symptoms of mania. They don't have credit cards to max-out, and they don't



have cars they can drive recklessly. There are also biases that can interfere with seeing symptoms as such. If one feels that happiness in childhood is always normal, and that pathological euphoria cannot exist in childhood, then that effectively guarantees that mania will not be viewed as such." It is therefore possible that these factors can lead to misdiagnosis of children.

Dr. Daphne Korczak, a child psychiatrist at the Hospital for Sick Children and assistant professor at the University of Toronto, says that "this exciting study of the preschool children of bipolar parents provides valuable information for both the primary care and specialist physician in clinic. It underscores the importance of understanding parental psychopathology when evaluating psychological and behavioural presentations of young children, and highlights the need to keep an open mind in the interpretation of ADHD-type symptoms in this population."

The advantage of early detection of ADHD and other developmental issues in these very young children is the possibility of earlier intervention. "Even in the absence of any pro-

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blems among their children, my general advice to parents with bipolar disorder is that whatever is healthy for other children is likely especially important for their children. That includes avoiding excessive stress, having regular sleep-wake times, balanced nutrition, and regular physical activity," says Dr. Goldstein. 🐾

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